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RUEHFR/AMEMBASSY PARIS 0875
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 NOUAKCHOTT 000215

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [KPAO](#) [KDEM](#) [LY](#) [MR](#)

SUBJECT: MAURITANIA: POLITICAL ROUNDUP FOR THE WEEK OF
MARCH 15-19

REF: A. NOUAKCHOTT 202

[1](#)B. NOUAKCHOTT 210

[1](#)C. NOUAKCHOTT 204

[1](#)D. 08 NOUAKCHOTT 699

[1](#)E. NOUAKCHOTT 211

[1](#)F. 08 NOUAKCHOTT 718

NOUAKCHOTT 00000215 001.2 OF 003

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Dennis Hankins for reasons 1.4 (b) and
(d).

[1](#)1. (SBU) Summary: For the week of March 15-19, the effects of Qadhafi's visit reverberated throughout the political scene. Aziz began a series of trips around the country that were widely viewed as campaign stops, and launched direct verbal attacks on President Abdallahi and former presidents Vall and Taya. Several more refugees returned from Senegal in the ongoing repatriation process. The government cracked down on an outspoken online news site, and arrested dozens of people in the south of the country after they threw rocks at a gendarmerie convoy. End summary.

[1](#)2. (SBU) Fallout from Qadhafi visit: Effects from Qadhafi's visit last week continued to reverberate through the Mauritanian political class (Ref A), while the FNDD released a letter March 16 asking the international community to distance itself publicly from Qadhafi's statements (Ref B). Qadhafi's visit appears to have accomplished two things: (1) it has emboldened General Aziz and allowed the junta to claim international (and even African Union) support for their unilateral elections plan; (2) it has created common cause (at least temporarily) for the RFD and FNDD. This new common ground led to the first ever joint declaration for the two groups regarding Qadhafi's blatant favoritism of the junta over opposition forces (Ref C). As for media reaction to Qadhafi's visit, the front-page headline in the March 15 edition of the "L'Eveil Hebdo" newspaper was representative: "QADHAFI'S 'MEDIATION': FIREMAN OR PYROMANIAC?" Numerous Mauritians of all political trends felt insulted by Qadhafi's condescending rhetoric and the large Libyan military presence that came with him. The sour taste of his visit hurts Aziz on the margins.

[1](#)3. (SBU) Aziz visits the people: Widely regarded as the

start of his presidential campaigning, Aziz visited his hometown of Akjoujt in the region of Inchiri March 14. Coming on the heels of Qadhafi's visit and unqualified support for the junta, a clearly emboldened Aziz delivered a speech in which he lambasted the "lying and corrupt" press, as well as President Abdallahi and former presidents Vall and Taya. Aziz is scheduled to begin a multi-region visit to Assaba, Brakna, and Gorgol March 19.

14. (C) Aziz targets Vall: Besides Aziz's verbal attacks on Vall in Akjoujt, two other incidents this week appeared to have political undertones and possible repercussions for Vall. First, tax authorities closed the headquarters of the mobile phone company Chinguitel (the actual phone network, however, continues to function). The ostensible reason for the closure was that Chinguitel owes 200 million ouguiyas (approximately \$769,000 USD) in back taxes. However, Vall is believed to hold a major stake in Chinguitel and to have profited from the granting of operating licenses (Ref D). Additionally, he supposedly owns the land for all of the Chinguitel relay towers, collecting rent each month on all of them. The second incident with implications for Vall involved statements made by Aziz while in Akjoujt. Aziz stated that the contract the government holds with mining companies is unfair. The government currently only receives 2% of the revenues for copper and 2.2% for gold -- amounts that were negotiated by Vall during the 2005-2007 transition period. Additionally, Vall supposedly still has business interests in the mining sector. Aziz proposed raising the percentage of government profits to 3% for copper and 4% for gold, a 55% net increase in government profits. Comment: True to form, Vall has remained silent after these latest attacks by Aziz. The targeting of Vall's business interests

NOUAKCHOTT 00000215 002.2 OF 003

would seem to indicate that Aziz is concerned about a possible Vall candidacy and is warning him to back off. However, Aziz's targeting of Chinguitel may prove to be short-sighted. Chinguitel is a Sudan-Mauritania joint venture, with Sudatel owning a majority stake (51%). Given that Sudan has been favorable towards the military junta in Mauritania, Aziz may be antagonizing his own friends. End comment.

15. (C) Vall as presidential candidate: Rumors of a possible RFD/FNDD/Vall alliance in the upcoming June 6 elections appeared. The supposed plan was that each group would put forth a candidate in the first round of elections, and whoever won the most votes would proceed to the second round, presumably to face Aziz. The possibility of Vall standing as "the" FNDD candidate was even floated. Comment: There are several problems with this plan, not the least of which is that Vall is still officially a Colonel in the military, and therefore, unable to stand as a presidential candidate. Additionally, it is hard to envision UFP President (and FNDD co-leader) Mohamed Ould Maouloud and other FNDD leaders accepting Vall as the standard-bearer for the FNDD during elections. Departing FNDD President Abeidna told Charge March 19 the rumor was being put out by Vall who was trying to destabilize the FNDD, End comment.

16. (SBU) Government press crackdown: A popular online news site was temporarily blocked in Mauritania and the editor arrested (Ref E), after a story appeared comparing one of the High State Council members to Nazi Germany's propaganda chief Joseph Goebbels. The site has since returned to normal operation, and the editor was released from jail March 18. Additionally, Attorney General Cheikh Sidi Mohamed Ould Cheinne was sacked March 18, presumably for being a little too over-zealous in his pursuit of media hostile to the junta. Though attacks on web sites in post-coup Mauritania are not new (Ref F), this is the first time that the High State Council-led government has been directly implicated in the muzzling of an online media outlet.

17. (U) Refugees return: 76 families (225 people total)

arrived March 16 from Senegal as part of the ongoing refugee repatriation process started under President Abdallahi and run by UNHCR and ANAIR. Over 9000 total refugees have returned since the start of the program in January 2008.

18. (C) RFD sends letter to UN: Post received on March 16 a copy of a letter sent from RFD President Ahmed Ould Daddah to UN Special Envoy for West Africa Said Djinnit. Asserting that a return to constitutional order and establishing a new democratic regime were paramount, RFD raised the "neither Abdallahi, neither Aziz" option again by stating this must be done "above any ambition to retake power that has been lost, or to maintain power taken by force." Characterizing Qadhafi's mediation efforts as a "patent failure," the letter outlined several RFD grievances:

- Qadhafi's visit to Mauritania as president of the AU constituted international recognition of the military regime.
- There were not enough meetings between Qadhafi and the "three principal actors" (RFD, FNDD, and High State Council supporters), and what meetings there were suffered from a lack of organization.
- The RFD was "particularly shocked" by Qadhafi's "brazen acceptance of the unilateral agenda put forth by the High State Council" for June 6 elections.

With these points in mind, the letter concluded that the "mediation" did not conform to the requirements put forth by the International Consultative Group in Paris February 20. The RFD reiterated its "categorical rejection" of the unilateral process undertaken by the High State Council, and stated that its own initiative put forth on February 3 was still a viable way out of the crisis.

19. (C) Senator wants help from Israelis: Charge met March
NOUAKCHOTT 00000215 003 OF 003

18 with pro-Abdallahi Senator Yousef Ould Tijani Sylla. Sylla is leaving "very soon" on a trip to Portugal, Spain, and Brussels to try and drum up anti-coup support. "We are seeking support from external actors to use against the military," he stated. Stressing numerous times that he was against the "freezing" of relations with Israel that had been undertaken by the junta, he asked Charge for assistance in facilitating contact with Israeli embassies in Europe. Sylla noted that he would be traveling on his own initiative, not as an official representative of the entire FNDD. Comment: Senator Sylla frequently requests meetings with Charge. According to LES however, he has limited credibility, has switched sides in the past, and is always claiming that it is time to "rise up" against the junta, even violently. As a result, his trustworthiness and role as a reliable partner are in doubt. Sylla suggested he wanted to get talk with the Israeli's for material support to "do something" about Aziz. He has previously claimed to be in contact with Mali and Algeria for the same purpose. End comment.

10. (U) Anti-coup sentiment: According to local press reports, more than 50 people were arrested March 18 in the town of Magta Lahjar (180 miles southeast of Nouakchott) after they threw rocks at a convoy of gendarmerie vehicles and shouted anti-coup slogans. The gendarmes were doing advance preparation work for General Aziz's visit to the region later in the week.

11. (C) FNDD Rotation: In keeping with their practice of rotating presidencies, the FNDD leadership shifted March 18 from Abdel Kouddous Abeidna's National Democratic Party (PND) to Messaoud Ould Boulkheir's People's Progressive Alliance (APP). Charge met March 19 with Abeidna who clearly was happy to pass on the mantle. Abeidna -- a very Westernized Anglophone who openly entered politic just a few years ago (against the wishes of his wealthy business/trading family), expressed frustration with his more experienced but traditional FNDD allies. He felt he had been successful in pushing the FNDD objectives forward during his

month-and-a-half tenure, but said, "I could have done a lot more except the others are too timid and prone to a wait-and-see attitude." He said he had told the others, "Aziz has weaknesses we can work against, but giving him time plays in his favor." Abeidna was disappointed that, "It is not in their political mentality to think of strategy and contingencies," noting he had been unable to get the alliance to seriously discuss what their real redlines are if and when they get into political negotiations. Although worried by the notable lack of international comment following the Qadhafi mediation fiasco, Abeidna saw the net result as positive in having forged closer ties between the FNDD and Ould Daddah (who he still distrusts) and actually undermining support for Aziz among his own supporters who were ashamed by the way Qadhafi treated Mauritaniens. Abeidna also believed Aziz' shifting of Mauritanian interests towards Libya and Iran would shake the confidence of Arab and European countries who had calculated that Aziz offers security and stability in the region. Abeidna noted that the FNDD leadership was struggling to reach a decision on what to do about upcoming Senate elections. He thought the FNDD would decide to boycott the process because it is being administered by the junta's administration, but he worried that sitting FNDD senators would run anyhow "because they like their salaries."

HANKINS